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A

SERMON.

Sermon by
Mr. Francis Leighton on the Death of
Mrs. Corbett

A

SERMON

PREACHED IN

BATTLEFIELD CHURCH,

AT THE

FUNERAL

OF

EMMA ELIZABETH,

WIFE OF

JOHN CORBET, Esq.

OF

SUNDORN,

IN THE

COUNTY OF SALOP,

SEPTEMBER 24, 1797.

SHREWSBURY,

PRINTED BY P. SANDFORD.

RB.31 c.81

CORRIGENDA.

Page 1, line 5, for *is* read *its*.

14, 3 from bottom, for *Chriſtan* read *Chriſtian*.

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SERMON.

1 *Thessalonians* iv. 13. *latter part.*

THAT YE SORROW NOT EVEN AS OTHERS WHICH HAVE NO HOPE.

TRUE religion profeſſes to regulate the courſe, and to reſtrain the exceſſes of the ſoft and tender affections of our nature. It even imperiouſly commands their ſilence, when they preſume to interfere with is ſuperior claims. But, except where the glory of God or the ſafety of the ſoul is concerned, it inculcates no ſevere or Stoical morality: it diſclaims that proud unrelenting philoſophy which, affecting to raiſe men above the feelings of humanity, really degrades them below the level of brutes.

The ſentiments of ſorrow inſeparable from nature on occaſions like the preſent diſgrace not the Chriſtian:

it is for infidels alone to deſpiſe, or to be aſhamed of them. Scripture records with no diſapprobation the *great and very ſore lamentation* of Joſeph and his brethren when they arrived at the *threſhing-floor of Atad*, within the confines of the land which was to receive the aſhes of their beloved father. It records with no diſapprobation the tender mourning of David, even over a ſon who was little worthy of it, when he *went up into the chamber over the gate to weep, and cried as he went, O my ſon Abſalom; my ſon, my ſon Abſalom! would God I had died for thee, O Abſalom, my ſon, my ſon!*

Nay, the tears which we ſhed for the loſs of thoſe who are dear to us are ſanctified by the moſt illuſtrious and venerable of all examples. The Divine *Author of our faith*, in the days when his Godhead was veiled in human nature, gave free vent to theſe amiable weakneſſes of it: *Jeſus wept* for his departed friend; and that with ſuch evident demonſtrations of ſincere and lively ſorrow as forced from the ſpectators the obſervation *behold how he loved him!*

The form itſelf of the words of the text implies that there is a kind and degree of ſorrow for the dead becoming the diſciples of Chriſt: a ſorrow

conſiſtent

conſiſtent with *hopes full of immortality*. The Apoſtle inſtructs his Theſſalonians that their friends *who ſleep in Jeſus* ſhall riſe at the ſound of the trumpet of judgment, and ſhall *join the Lord in the air*, even before the faithful who ſhall be living on the earth at that tremendous period; and that ſo the whole body of believers *ſhall be ever with the Lord*. By this conſideration he aims not to reprove, but to conſole their grief. He permits them to *ſorrow:* but he warns them *not to ſorrow as others which have no hope*. Thus *Jeſus wept* for Lazarus: yet Jeſus knew that he himſelf who is *the reſurrection and the life* was even then about to bring him up from the chambers of the grave; and would finally raiſe him to that conſummate glory and felicity in the kingdom of God for the enjoyment of which he was created.

We then *ſorrow like others who have no hope*, when we abandon ourſelves to impatience and deſpair: when, like *Rachel weeping for her children*, we *refuſe to be comforted:* when we rebelliouſly ſtruggle againſt the diſpenſations of God: when we perverſely reject all conſolation from the bleſſings which in his mercy he ſpares to us; and obſtinately murmur and pine for thoſe which, perhaps in equal compaſſion, he is pleaſed to take away.

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The moſt innocent connexions ceaſe to be ſo when we ſtrain them too cloſe. To attach our hearts ſolely to any earthly object, to place our whole delight in it, to rely abſolutely on it for happineſs, is to erect it into a divinity: and, though it be a conſort, a parent or a child which we idolize, idolatry is not the leſs odious in the ſight of God, to whom our firſt homage and chief attachment are due. Religion requires that our beſt and warmeſt affections have always God for their object: and though we cannot be perfectly united to him but in the life to come, we are forbidden to make any of the enjoyments of this life the ſource of our happineſs. If religion did not inculcate this neceſſary duty, prudence itſelf would do the office of religion: it would teach us the abſurdity of fixing immutable affections on objects liable to change: it would preach to us, with the Apoſtle, *that they that have wives ſhould be as though they had none; and they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that uſe this world as not abuſing it; for the faſhion of this world paſſeth away:* and, with the Pſalmiſt, *put not your truſt in any child of man, in whom there is no help: his breath goeth forth: he returneth to his earth: in that very day his thoughts periſh.*

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When we fall into deſpair through the preſſure of theſe melancholy diſpenſations, we give foundation for the moſt unfavourable concluſions reſpecting our faith and dependence on God. Theſe afflicting ſtrokes of his hand are probations by which, according to the ſentiment of an Apoſtle, he caſts our faith into the crucible. While you are in the midſt of proſperity, it is difficult to diſtinguiſh whether it be the love of your benefactor or of his benefits which kindles your devotion. Tribulation ſeparates the gold from the droſs. It is only in tribulation that you can recognize a genuine zeal and an unſuſpected piety: and when in theſe great trials your faith forſakes you, it is an evident proof that you have taken a phantom for a reality, a ſhadow for a ſubſtance. To ſubmit and to hope is the motto of a chriſtian

The example of the *Father of the faithful* preſents itſelf here to my view. If ever mortal had reaſon to fix his hopes on an earthly object, it was that patriarch. Iſaac was the *child of promiſe*; the miracle of grace; the great type and pledge of the *holy ſeed in whom all the nations of the earth were to be bleſſed*. God commands him to ſacrifice this ſon. Who had ever greater reaſon to conclude that his hopes

were blaſted? Yet what does Abraham? He *ſubmits*. He quits his houſe: he conducts his ſon toward the fatal mountain: he builds the pile: he binds the innocent victim: he raiſes his arm in the act to embrue his paternal hands in the blood, and to plunge the knife in the boſom of this dear child. But in ſubmitting *he hopes:* in the ſtrong language of inſpiration *againſt hope he believes in hope:* he believes that which is incredible, rather than ſuſpect for a moment that his faith can be fatal to him, or that the promiſe of God can fail: he believes that this heir, preternaturally given, will be preternaturally reſtored to him: that his ſon, the fruit of a miracle, will be miraculouſly raiſed again. Such was the father of the faithful. *If*, ſaith our Lord, *ye are the children of Abraham, ye will do the works of Abraham.* Ye will ſubmit and hope. Ye will ſay with the old teſtament ſaints, who *deſired to ſee the things which ye have ſeen but ſaw them not, when my father and my mother forſake me, then the Lord will take me up*,—and again, *though he ſlay me, yet will I truſt in him.*

Again, we *ſorrow like others who have no hope*, when, forgetting the *life and immortality which are brought to light by the goſpel*, we ſuffer infidelity to mingle itſelf with our grief. We judge of the happineſs of others by

by that which conſtitutes our own: and, as we regard life as the greateſt of all bleſſings, we conſider him who is deprived of it as worthy of the deepeſt compaſſion. Death preſents itſelf to our eyes under the image of univerſal privation. He who is dead ſeems to us to be deſpoiled of all things. If by any lamentable diſaſter he had loſt his fortune, his eyes, or any of his limbs or faculties, we ſhould have been ſenſibly touched with his misfortune; and we think we have much greater reaſon to bewail him when death robs him of all theſe bleſſings at once, and apparently of his very exiſtence. But this ſorrow in reality becomes only *thoſe who have no hope* after death. Was the ſubject of our grief one who has terminated a Chriſtian life by a Chriſtian death? and can we reaſon ſo inconſiſtently, and act in a manner ſo incompatible with the faith which we profeſs? We believe the ſoul immortal: we believe that, at the moment of its departure in Chriſt, it takes its flight for heaven; and that the angels, which encamped around it for its protection and defence, bear it at once into the boſom of God. We have ſeen perhaps our friends, while living, ſigh and languiſh for the moment of their deliverance; yet, when that moment is arrived, we lament and deplore their ſtate. They were indeed worthy of pity when they were with us

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in the *vale of tears*. They deſerved compaſſion when, like ourſelves, they were always conflicting with ſin, and often overcome by it: when, running the race of ſalvation, they were liable to ſtumble in the painful courſe: when, meditating on truth, they often found it covered with an impenetrable veil: when, aſpiring to perfection, they beheld it removed to ſuch height and diſtance that they could not attain to it: but *now* they *ſee God face to face:* now they *are come to mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jeruſalem; and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general aſſembly and church of the firſt-born:* now they are freed from all the infirmities of nature; and drink large draughts of thoſe *pleaſures which are at the right hand of God:* now the Spirit of God declares concerning them that *they reſt from their labours*, and that *their works do follow them:* and they themſelves, could they ſpeak, would ſay to us in accents of affectionate and compaſſionate remonſtrance, *men, brethren, fathers, weep not for us, but weep for yourſelves.*

But, if there is a ſorrow inconſiſtent with the hope of a Chriſtian, there is alſo a ſorrow perfectly compatible with it, and even inſeparable from it. The grief which Chriſtianity condemns is that turbulent and rebellious grief by which, infidelity drowning the

the voice of religion, we inordinately bewail our departed friends, as if there were neither hope after life, nor life after death: but that dutiful and chaſtiſed ſorrow which makes us affectionately ſenſible of the loſs we have ſuſtained, without ſhutting our eyes againſt the reſources which providence opens to us; that ſorrow by which we lament the agonies our friends have ſuffered in their paſſage to heaven, without ceaſing to believe and to rejoice that they have arrived there, *that* ſorrow, far from being criminal, is a ſenſation inſeparable from nature, and even an indiſpenſable duty of religion.

Yes: we are permitted, when we ſee the precious remains of thoſe who are parts of ourſelves carried out in funereal ſolemnity, to recall the memory of thoſe tender connexions which the unrelenting hand of death has torn aſunder. It is lawful to recollect the affectionate counſels which theſe dear friends gave us in all our perplexities: their anxious and watchful ſuperintendance of our education; their cares for our maintenance and eſtabliſhment: the unqueſtionable proofs of love for us which they exhibited during their lives, and which were redoubled as death approached. We may without offence remember the ſweet ſolace and ſatisfaction which our whole lives

have derived from their dear ſociety: the diſcourſes they addreſſed to us on the bed of death: their tender adieus: their unſuſpected proteſtations; the prayers which they poured out for us from the bottom of their ſouls; the torrents of their tears; the laſt exertions of their dying tenderneſs. It is lawful, it is expedient to cheriſh the memory of theſe affecting objects: they tend to nouriſh ſentiments and principles ſerviceable to religion and honourable to humanity.

The regard due to our own moſt important intereſts is another juſtifiable ſource of ſorrow on theſe mournful occaſions. The firſt reflection which the ſight of a dead or dying perſon inſpires is, that we muſt die like him, and that the way he is going is *the way of all the earth:* but it is a reflection which we uſually make without feeling, or at leaſt without particularly bringing it home to our "own buſineſs and boſoms." While we eſtabliſh the general rule, *it is appointed unto all men once to die,* we make, as it were, an exception in our own favour. We are not, indeed, ſo abſurd as to flatter ourſelves that we are exempted from this fatal neceſſity: but we conſider it always as a remote event; and the diſtance of the object renders it indiſtinct and unintereſting. We attend the beds of the dying: we

cloſe

cloſe their eyes: we eſcort them to the ſepulchre: we pronounce their funeral orations: and yet, as if we had ſome natural prerogative above them, we return to our houſes; we aſpire to their employments: we divide their ſpoils; we take poſſeſſion of their eſtates: like the raſh mariner who, beholding from the ſhore a veſſel diſmaſted by the tempeſt, and ſinking beneath the waves, embarks on board his own, encounters the fury of the waters, and braves the ſame dangers for the ſake of ſharing the plunder of the wreck.

A wiſe man conſiders theſe things with other eyes: and the love which he owes to himſelf excites in him a rational ſorrow to behold in every death and every funeral which he attends an image of his own. The dead preach to him with more impreſſive eloquence than ever fell from a living orator, *vanity of vanities; all is vanity. All fleſh is graſs: and the goodlineſs thereof is as the flower of the field. The faſhion of this world paſſeth away. Man walketh in a vain ſhadow.* He recalls to his memory the maladies they ſuffered; the troubles which agitated their minds: the delirium which confounded their underſtandings: and he applies to himſelf the awful inference how unable *he* will probably be in thoſe ſad moments to collect his thoughts, and to *work out his own ſalvation.* He ſays

to

to himſelf, "theſe my friends had the ſame health, the ſame vigour which I have: they poſſeſſed the ſame honours, the ſame riches which I poſſeſs: yet the torrent of time has ſwept them away; and it will ſweep me away alſo."

There is yet another kind of ſorrow which it becomes us as Chriſtians to feel when we contemplate the death bed and the tomb: and that is the ſorrow of penitence. *By one man*, ſaith the Spirit of God, *ſin entered into the world, and death by ſin:* and again, *the wages of ſin is death.* It was announced before the fall as the ſure effect of diſobedience to the command of God: and that command was no ſooner broken than the ſentence went forth, *Becauſe thou haſt done this, duſt thou art and unto duſt ſhalt thou return.* Death, to the beſt of men, *(for there is no man*, ſaith Solomon, *that ſinneth not)* is the puniſhment not only of the ſin of his firſt father but of his own. It is a conſtant monument of the wrath of God, and of his hatred againſt ſin: and by it he chaſtiſes at once thoſe who are taken from us and thoſe who ſurvive. It is impoſſible to behold the ſufferings which, from a thouſand ſources, the ſincereſt Chriſtans undergo in dying: it is impoſſible to behold the terrible, the humiliating change which death produces on the "human form divine" when

when he aſſerts his indefeaſible right over our bodies, without perceiving that God is angry with the work of his hands; without recognizing ſome great and fatal moral diſorder, as the only adequate cauſe of this moſt dreadful of all the diſorders which prevail in nature: without acknowledging that it is ſin which ſeparates between friend and friend, between huſband and wife, between parent and child; which rends aſunder the moſt ſacred and endearing ties of humanity; which blaſts and embitters even the innocent pleaſures of life: and which ſpreads the gloom of ſorrow over the ſpectators of the holieſt and happieſt death.

I doubt not that your hearts have already applied to the preſent lamentable and univerſally lamented occaſion moſt of the reflections which the text has ſuggeſted to me. Seldom ſhall we witneſs a death which can afford more juſtifiable ground for *ſorrow*: ſeldom can it be *leſs* juſtifiable to *ſorrow as others which have no hope*.

I ſaid that death, that moſt eloquent preacher, cries aloud to us that *all is vanity*: that *the faſhion of this world paſſeth away*: that *man walketh in a vain ſhadow*: and what example can more ſtrikingly confirm

theſe ſolemn truths than that which now lies before your eyes? Of all thoſe circumſtances of the life of our departed friend which moſt engaged the attention, the admiration, perhaps the envy of ſuperficial obſervers,—of all thoſe circumſtances not one is now of the leaſt importance to her. That her deſcent was reſpectable, and her matrimonial connexion honourable: that her form was beautiful and elegant, and her manners poliſhed and engaging: that ſhe moved gracefully in an elevated ſphere of life: that ſhe enjoyed an ample fortune and ſplendid eſtabliſhments: nay, that ſhe was bleſſed with an affectionate huſband, and children who bid fair to emulate her own excellence;—all this *now* concerns her not: in all this there is *now* nothing to excite the envy of the pooreſt, the meaneſt, the moſt unfortunate of mankind. They to whom theſe advantages are all, when they are ſummoned by the imperious call of death to relinquiſh them, are *of all men moſt miſerable*. Theſe things are *now* to *her* as if ſhe had never poſſeſſed them. If ſhe thinks on them at all, it is with ſentiments of compaſſion for us, her ſurvivors, to whom ſuch tranſient objects ſeem important: or of gratitude to her God who ſuffered her not to be entangled in the tempting ſnares, but enabled her to *uſe this world as not abuſing it*.

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Of ſtill leſs importance to her is the ſumptuous apparatus, the ſolemn funereal proceſſion that attends her to her long home. The poor breathleſs clay is inſenſible of the pomp that ſurrounds it: the departed ſpirit can derive no ſatisfaction from it. Yet it is both indecent and inhuman, perhaps profane alſo, to ſcoff at theſe mournful preparations, however coſtly; or to ſtigmatize them as ſacrifices offered to the pride of the ſurvivors. They are indeed inefficient, but they are affectionate expreſſions of reſpect to departed friends: they are ſanctioned by ancient cuſtom and venerable example: nay, may we not ſay they are hallowed by the approbation of our bleſſed Lord himſelf? A pious woman, in the zeal of her affection, had *poured a box of very precious ointment upon his head:* his diſciples, indignant at what they conceived to be a ſinful waſte, rebuked her: but our Saviour juſtifies the act: *why trouble ye the woman? ſhe hath wrought a good work upon me: in that ſhe hath poured this ointment on my body, ſhe did it for my burial: the poor ye have always with you, but me ye have not always:* as if he had ſaid, "Ye can never want opportunities of charity to the living: but a dying or deceaſed friend can receive but once this melancholy tribute of eſteem and regard."

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The reflection moſt conſolatory to the poor and moſt ſalutary to the rich, which can be made on the diſtribution which it has pleaſed God to appoint of the good things of this life, is a reflection which the example before us naturally ſuggeſts and forcibly inculcates: that the diſtinctions of rank and fortune are fleeting and tranſient: they are ſubject to perpetual fluctuation and viciſſitude, even while we live: and when we die they leave us for ever. But the diſtinctions which really enrich and ennoble men, and to which the poor mechanic and the humble peaſant may aſpire with as fair a proſpect of ſucceſs as the mighty and the noble—the *only* diſtinctions which *now* avail our amiable friend—the diſtinctions of piety and goodneſs are permanent and unchangeable: they forſake us not on the ſick and dying bed: they ſurvive the grave, and accompany us into eternity.

I ſaid we are permitted to bewail the diſſolution of tender connexions between ourſelves and thoſe whoſe loſs we deplore: and who in this reſpect was ever more juſtly to be lamented than ſhe to whom we are paying the laſt honours? Who ever poſſeſſed more eminently the art of rendering the ſacred, the delightful relations of parent, conſort, friend, doubly endearing

endearing, by the fondneſs of her affection, the ſteadineſs of her attachment, and the delicacy of her attentions?

But I ſaid that the ſorrow is ſelfiſh and unchriſtian which rejects conſolation for the departure of thoſe to whom our *loſs* is inexpreſſible *gain:* and in what inſtance can ſuch inconſolable ſorrow be more inexcuſable than in the preſent? If, according to the words of the Apoſtle in the verſe following the text, *God will bring with him them which ſleep in Jeſus*, ſhall we not hope that he will *bring with him* her whoſe departure we now lament? Not only was her reverence for the Chriſtian religion ſincere and unaffected: not only was her attendance on its ſolemn rites and ordinances punctual and exemplary; but ſhe gave a proof, which we ought to conſider as unequivocal, that it conſtituted the ground of her hope and conſolation in thoſe extremities in which all earthly comforts fail. In thoſe trying moments, having expreſſed the moſt earneſt deſire to perform that awful act of devotion which the church conſiders as a ſolemn recognition that we *truſt not for acceptance with God in our own righteouſneſs but in his manifold and great mercies*, and in the all-atoning ſacrifice and perfect righteouſneſs of his Son; and having performed it

with a reverence and fervency which ſhewed that ſhe looked through the outward ſymbols to the holy myſteries repreſented by them; ſhe declared, alluding to the medical remedies which had been preſented to her in the hope of alleviating the ſufferings of the body, "that *this* was the beſt thing which had yet been given to her:" intimating that ſhe had derived from it that which the church pronounces to be the intended benefit: namely, that *her ſoul was ſtrengthened and refreſhed* by the grace accompanying the ſacrament, *as the* weary and overlaboured *body is refreſhed by bread and wine.*

This faith it was, we ought not to doubt, which enabled her in ſo eminent and exemplary a manner to fulfil the important functions of a mother, a wife, a friend, and a patroneſs of the poor, of whom it may with truth be ſaid, *that when their ear heard her then it bleſſed her, and when their eye ſaw her it gave witneſs to her.*

This faith it was which, having enabled her to diſcharge the duties of health, ſtrength and proſperity, ſupported her in the performance of the more arduous and awful duties of the ſick and dying bed: it was the ſource of her affectionate and complacent behaviour

to

to all around her: of the ſtrength of mind by which ſhe concealed from thoſe ſhe loved her ſufferings and her apprehenſions: the ſource of the meek reſignation, the pious fortitude, the placid compoſure with which ſhe met the gradual approaches of the laſt enemy, and diſarmed him of all his terrors.

Theſe are reflections which at once juſtify our ſorrow for the dear, the honoured ſubject of them, and tend to reſtrain the exceſs of it. The hiſtory of private life is a ſhort, and not often an eventful hiſtory: but even this rude and haſty ſketch might be filled up by thoſe who had the happineſs of near and conſtant approach to her with a thouſand beautiful lights, a thouſand delicate and diſcriminating touches; memory might add ſome new and engaging trait to it every hour, and work it up finally into a ſtriking and affecting likeneſs.

Let her friends then ſorrow: for how can they forbear?

> " They cannot but remember ſuch things were,
> And were moſt dear to them!"

Religion itſelf impoſes no other reſtraint on their grief but ſuch as the refreſhing memory of her virtues will of

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of itſelf ſuggeſt. The ſoft remembrance of them will calm the tumultuous ſwellings of their grief, till it ſubſides into a tender penſiveneſs, a placid, reſpectful and affectionate ſorrow, which they will innocently indulge, and which will ſhed a melancholy pleaſure over every ſcene in which they enjoyed her ſociety: it will conſecrate every ſpot that was dear to her: it will erect every object into an intereſting monument of affection: they will ſay*, "here ſhe turned: here ſhe ſat down: in this place her ſoft voice or her eloquent countenance ſpoke a thouſand endearing and affectionate things."

But the greateſt conſolation *they* can receive, and the moſt important benefit *we* can derive from the contemplation of the ſcene before us, will be obtained by endeavouring to imitate her example: by "copying one by one, and tranſplanting into our own lives" the virtues and the graces which adorned her character. *She reſts from her labours, and her works have followed her:* but *being dead ſhe yet ſpeaketh*, and emphatically inforces the apoſtolical admonition, *be ye followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promiſes.*

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* Qui ſi revolſe: qui ritenne il paſſo:
Qui co' begli occhj mi trafiſſe il cuore. PETRARCA.

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